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U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Reform

“The Capture and Treatment of Political Prisoners: One Year after Castro’s  
Crackdown in Cuba”

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the continuing tragedy of Cuba’s political prisoners. As President Bush said recently, Fidel Castro’s rule is so brutal it outrages the conscience of the world.

In April of this year, the President and Secretary of State Powell urged members of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, meeting in Geneva, to hold the Cuban government accountable for its human rights abuses, and especially for its unjust imprisonment of peaceful human rights activists, independent journalists and independent librarians.

The UN Commission did vote to call Cuba to account. The Commission again urged Cuba to permit a personal representative of the UN Human Rights Commission’s High Commissioner to enter Cuba and inspect the situation there. The Castro regime has again rejected this long standing request by the United Nations.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and other independent non-governmental organizations continue to document the suffering of Cuba’s political prisoners. The Castro regime beats them, deprives them of sleep, subjects them to filthy, crowded, unventilated, vermin-infested cells, houses them with common criminals, and denies them proper food, potable water, and adequate medical care. According to Amnesty International, Cuba has the highest proportion of prisoners of conscience per capita of any nation in the world.

Many political prisoners are seriously ill, yet, as a matter of regime policy, they are denied appropriate medical treatment. I am speaking of Marta

Beatriz Roque, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, Oscar Espinosa Chepe, Raul Rivero, Manuel Vazquez Portal, among many others.

And the number of political prisoners is increasing.

A little over two weeks ago, on Sunday, June 6, Cuban state security broke into the houses of four peaceful democratic activists in the Cuban city of Santa Clara. Cuban officials arrested these individuals and took them to state security headquarters. Two of the activists, the brothers Luis Enrique Junquera Garcia and Yamil Sanchez Munoz are still being held in prison, unable to communicate with the outside world.

What is their crime? They are members of the Citizens Organizing Committee of Project Varela, which has collected more than 30,000 signatures of Cuban citizens who are calling for a national referendum on basic political and economic reforms. Such a petition is authorized even under Cuba's communist constitution. But Fidel Castro believes it will subvert his totalitarian rule. For the past year, he has tried and tried, without success, to eradicate Project Varela. His frustration is becoming more and more evident.

As Castro's nervousness increases, his complete moral collapse becomes even more apparent. Last year, he returned to his long practice of arbitrary, summary executions. In an action that outraged the world, he ordered the death by firing squad of three young men whose only offense was to steal a motorboat so they could escape from Cuba. The Castro government executed them within a few days of their capture, after kangaroo-court trials from which independent observers and the diplomatic community were excluded. Not even their mothers were permitted to visit them before they died.

Their deaths ended a four year Cuban moratorium on use of the death penalty, after a huge outcry from the international community in the year 2000. In 1999, the Castro government had executed an estimated 20 – 30 people, placing Cuba third in the world in state executions on a per capita basis (just behind Iran and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

The Administrator of USAID, Andrew Natsios, spoke recently at the University of Miami. He sent a clear message to Fidel Castro and the members of his government. He told Fidel Castro the Cuban desire for

freedom cannot be extinguished. And he called on the operatives in Castro's regime to stop the human rights abuses. Mr. Natsios reminded them the Cuban people will soon hold them all accountable.

The U.S. Department of State has placed on a visa watch list each of the 300 individuals --judges, policemen, prosecutors, and witnesses -- who participated in last year's Cuban show trials that resulted in convictions of 75 human rights activists, independent journalists, and independent librarians.

Cuban officials and others who perpetrated these and similar acts of injustice will never find shelter in the United States.

The United States of America is committed to promoting a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. As part of that effort, USAID -- the United States Agency for International Development -- calls on all the people in Cuba, and especially those who work for the Cuban government, to prepare now for that transition by refusing to carry out acts of violence and repression, and by beginning to show compassion for all those whom the Castro regime has imprisoned.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I will be happy to respond to any questions that you or other Subcommittee Members may have.